

## Time to Do the Right Thing with Food Labeling

On its face, the recent decision by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture to conduct a crackdown on what it considers to be false or misleading claims on dairy product labels may seem to be in everyone's best interest. Consumers are protected from misinformation; farmers are protected from dairy co-ops wishing to dictate how they should farm; and of course, the Monsanto Corporation is protected from taking a huge loss on one of its most controversial products.

As is often the case in situations like this, however, what's really being protected is the *status quo* in an industry that is sorely in need of progressive change and an infusion of visionary thinking. The essential question to ask is "What's really in everyone's best interest over the long term?"

In our opinion, it is not an example of visionary insight to assert that anyone involved in the dairy industry will benefit in the long run by withholding information from members of the general public, making it more difficult for them to discern how their food is being produced. Effective food labeling will work to reveal, not conceal the essential facts of interest to consumers.

But it's important to understand that the whole labeling controversy itself is only a sideshow to the real issues involved here, which have more to do with ethics and the industry-perceived need for the use of performance enhancing drugs in livestock production.

The use of artificial growth hormones (rBST or rBGH) is certainly not the only example of such drugs being used on farms today. In fact, the majority of antibiotics sold in America are actually used in livestock production as growth promoting agents, not as treatment for disease in humans or animals as many uninformed, potentially confused consumers might assume.

So what's so wrong if an individual farmer or group of them working together wishes to advertise, even on a label, the choice made not to use such drugs at all, or at least not unless clinically indicated? While we are so busy debating when and how it is proper to put an absence claim on food labels, when do we get to consider the value of being completely forthcoming with consumers and letting them make informed choices?

It is our feeling that the agricultural community in Pennsylvania –and in America – may be missing the visionary opportunity of a lifetime to make complete disclosure its primary operating principle. Why are we even debating the proper labeling of performance enhancing drugs used in food production, when the world would beat a path to our door if we banned them altogether?

The history of science and technology is full of examples where particular accomplishments have helped to improve life on Earth as we know it. But much of modern science is now dedicated to the work of undoing the problems caused by previous advances. By all means, it makes perfect sense to employ the "precautionary principle" when research on any aspect of food production is not conclusive – in doing so, the countries of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and all 25 members of the European Union have already banned the use of rBST/rBHG in the production of milk.

Why would we in this country stake the future of our farms on anything less than production of the highest quality food products possible? We have an opportunity to recognize not only the responsibility, but the power we have in the agricultural community to make more careful choices for the future, and to fully involve our paying customers as partners in that process as well.

The food labeling decisions being made right now on our behalf, whether as farmers or consumers, are poorly conceived, shortsighted and will only serve to continue the seemingly unending cycle of dim hopes and dashed dreams that have characterized family farms in America for the past half century.

In contrast to this bleak picture, consumers around the world are waking up to the promise of more informed choices and an agriculture that works with nature instead of against it. Let's give them what they want and deserve, and ensure the future viability of our farms in the process.

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